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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ASMARA 000709

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LONDON, PARIS FOR AFRICA WATCHERS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/30/2017

TAGS: PREL KREC ASEC ER

SUBJECT: LONG-AWAITED MEETING WITH MFA YIELDS LITTLE

Classified By: CDA Jennifer A. McIntyre, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (C) Summary: In the absence of a direct response from the Government of the State of Eritrea (GSE) regarding the August 10 notification to close their consulate in Oakland, California, Charge d'Affaires requested a meeting with representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) to discuss U.S.-Eritrean relations. During the August 24 meeting with MFA acting Americas Director Elsa Haile, Charge emphasized the importance of reopening a dialogue; in particular encouraging the MFA to address the Embassy's still-unresolved bilateral problems which resulted in the Oakland closure, and to discuss Eritrea's activities vis-a-vis Somalia in view of A/S Jendayi Fraizer's August 17 statement regarding the possibility of Eritrea being added to the State Sponsors of Terrorism List. Haile sidestepped the bilateral issues by directing Charge to raise them with the MFA's Protocol Division. She commented that the GSE's primary foreign policy was resolving the border dispute with Ethiopia. Somalia was a "side issue" and the U.S. has been using Somalia as a pretext for derailing discussion on the border. Not unexpectedly, the meeting produced no positive forward momentum. Haile staunchly maintained the position that the bilateral decisions were not within the America's division purview and policy discussions could only be addressed at more senior government levels. End Summary.

CHARGE URGES DIALOGUE TO RESOLVE AREAS OF CONTENTION

¶12. (C) On August 24, Charge d'Affaires and Poloff (notetaker) met with Elsa Haile, MFA Director of the Multilateral and UN Organizations Division (and currently acting Director for the Americas), Tiagese Kiflezge, desk officer for the Americas (notetaker) and Biniam Berhe Tewolde, also of the Multilateral and UN Division (notetaker). Charge opened the meeting by expressing her deep concern over the state of bilateral relations and emphasized the critical need to renew dialogue on both operational and policy issues to halt this downward spiral. On operational issues, she noted that the Embassy's inability for over a year to engage the GSE in discussions on lifting overwhelming operational restrictions had finally resulted in the reciprocal measure of ordering the closure of Oakland. Charge provided details of the many GSE-imposed restrictions and their impact on U.S. Embassy operations to include: inability of diplomats to travel outside of Asmara; interference with the diplomatic pouch;

refusal of official visas for U.S. temporary duty (TDY) staff; delays in registering personal vehicles of U.S. Embassy personnel; and the MFA's refusals to grant meetings with GSE officials. The Charge requested the MFA set up a forum for discussion and eventual resolution of these critical issues, noting that the continuation of these restrictions would eventually restrict U.S. Embassy operations to such an extent that we may be unable to continue operations in Asmara. She concluded by urging a joint proactive approach to addressing these problems, adding that reciprocal restrictions which have been levied on the operations of the Eritrean Embassy in Washington could be quickly lifted if we were permitted to operate freely and in accordance with international norms.

¶3. (C) Moving to policy issues, Charge expressed her concern about the absence of any direct and open dialogue to date on Somalia. She referred to A/S Frazier's August 17 statements concerning the possibility of Eritrea being included on the State Sponsors of Terrorism List and the UN monitoring group's report detailing delivery of Eritrean material support to violent groups in Somalia. She emphasized that a placement of Eritrea on the State Sponsors List ill-served both countries, noting that countries that have been placed on the list in the past (like Libya and Sudan) have found it very difficult to have the designation lifted. Charge urged the MFA to propose to the appropriate GSE office to open a discussion on our respective governments' positions in Somalia. Such discussion would not have to occur in Asmara, but could be addressed through other avenues, such as the Eritrean Embassy and State Department officials in Washington. She added that our Embassy would be happy to meet, or facilitate meetings with, any designated GSE official on this topic.

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BILATERAL OPERATIONS: MFA ASSERTS GSE ACTIONS ARE RECIPROCAL

¶4. (C) Elsa Haile thanked Charge for the briefing and noted that as she was not completely familiar with all of our bilateral issues, she would not be able to respond to all of the points raised during this meeting. Regarding the operational problems mentioned by Charge, she stated that with the exception of the travel restrictions, all GSE actions responded to U.S. actions against Eritrea. Tiagese Kiflezge joined in, asserting that the GSE's refusals to issue official TDY visas was in response to U.S. Embassy Asmara's denial of visas to members of the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) traveling on diplomatic passports during 2003-2006. Although pressed for more details, Kiflezge provided none. (Note: Post presumes Kiflezge was referring to the numerous cultural groups who have applied in previous years to travel to the U.S. for Eritrean cultural festivals. While sponsored by the PFDJ, these individuals are assuredly not diplomats nor diplomatic passport holders. Many of these individuals have proven to be unqualified visa applicants. End Note.)

¶5. (C) Per the other GSE restrictions, Kiflezge cryptically commented that the Eritrean restrictions on the diplomatic pouch "had nothing to do with our consular services and closure." The travel restrictions, continued Haile, were in place because of national security concerns and applied equally to all diplomats. She noted that the U.S. has not taken reciprocal action against Pakistan which also has travel restrictions based on security concerns. Charge explained that while the U.S. Mission notifies the Pakistani government in advance of the travel of our personnel, we are not denied permission to travel through most of the country, as in Eritrea. She added that our Embassy security personnel were eager to cooperate with police and security personnel, noting that our new Regional Security Officer had been seeking, unsuccessfully to date, meetings with the Police

Commissioner and other security professionals. Haile did not acknowledge Charge's invitation to work collaboratively with the Embassy on security issues, only repeating that the travel restrictions were a matter of national security.

¶6. (C) Wrapping up the discussion on operational problems, Haile told Charge that these issues fall under the purview of the Office of Protocol, and directed the Charge to raise these issues with them. Haile commented that the Eritrean Embassy in Washington D.C. should be accorded the same access to the Department. Charge assured her that our Department officials would be happy to grant any requests for meetings by the Eritrean Embassy. In the end, Haile did acknowledge that the GSE views our operational difficulties as "an outcome of policy."

POLICY ISSUES: MFA UNABLE TO ENGAGE IN DISCUSSION

¶7. (C) Turning to Somalia, Haile stated that Eritrean support for the Council for Islamic Courts did not constitute support for terrorists against American interests, but rather was an effort to ensure security in the region. Biniam Tewolde added that Eritrea is itself a victim of terrorism, commenting that the GSE does not admit into Eritrea any individuals named on the UN terrorism lists. Haile asserted that the allegations in the UN monitoring report were untrue. She stated, "We are not harboring terrorists. Since day one we have made it clear what we stand for. You know Eritrea is not sponsoring or harboring terrorists. Our priority is the border issue; we don't accept anything that is a side issue."

The Charge acknowledged having read the President's denials of the UN allegations in official media statements. If the UN charges were false, Charge reasoned, the GSE had even more reason to support an open dialogue with the U.S. Charge cautioned that while the GSE might view Somalia as a "side issue", the U.S. certainly does not and failure to address this impasse could have a very adverse, long-term impact on our relationship. Haile did not address Charge's proposal for further dialogue, stating that the MFA could not discuss Somalia policy which had to occur at a higher level.

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¶8. (C) Reverting to a favorite GSE subject for grievance, Haile repeated the oft-heard tale of John Foster Dulles' position during the 1952 referendum, commenting that the U.S. never wanted Eritrea to exist. However, she added, "even though we have that in our mind, we are working for the best for the U.S." She further said she has never been instructed to work against the United States) rather, her instructions have been to work together with the U.S. Adding that Eritrea is small but a sovereign nation, she closed the meeting on the rhetorical question, "Why does the U.S. create unnecessary disagreements?"

COMMENT

¶9. (C) In our first official meeting with the MFA since the Oakland closure announcement, Post had hoped for a more productive discussion about the perceived steps and missteps that brought our governments to the present state of affairs.

Even a heated disagreement would have been welcome. Instead our MFA interlocutors offered little in the way of discussion, avoiding our openings to address both Oakland and the State Sponsors of Terrorism List. Nor did they express any interest in further discussion. Our Americas Department interlocutors have clearly passed the buck to Protocol, and recused themselves from any responsibility in the decision-making process. While we have requested a follow-on meeting with the Protocol Department to discuss the operational issues, we have little hope this meeting will produce anything new as our interlocutors will be the same

individuals who have not addressed these problems over the course of the last year.

¶10. (C) Post is not surprised, but nonetheless disappointed, to find that the MFA's go-to person for International Organizations, the UN and the Americas finds herself too junior to discuss core GSE policies, and views Somalia as a minor issue in shaping Eritrea's future. While the meeting yielded little in the way of productive information or forward momentum in resolving any of our bilateral problems, it did demonstrate again that the true power, influence and decision-making for the GSE's foreign policy lies outside the MFA. End Comment.

MCINTYRE